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Bishop's bills would tax feds for ownership of state lands

Robert Gehrke , The Salt Lake Tribune

WASHINGTON -- Rep. Rob Bishop is pushing ahead with legislation he says will make sure Utah's schools are not cheated by the federal government.

But his legislation would mean significant shifts in land management and multi-billion-dollar payments from the federal government that Bishop concedes will be difficult to get through Congress any time soon.

"The federal government has always had this cavalier attitude about land in the West," he said, with some believing it is vast expanses of little value.

The two bills Bishop recently introduced put forward the framework of The **APPLE Initiative**, a plan devised by former Utah House Speaker Marty Stephens aimed at turning federal lands not generating revenue for the states into cash cows that could pump money into Western schools.

One bill would require the federal government to pay property taxes on the lands within a state's borders. That would mean about \$ 214 million paid directly to Utah, and about \$ 4 billion nationwide.

"Most of my fellow members gag at the price tag to it," Bishop said. "The way I look at it, it's what the federal government prohibits states from raising by themselves."

The other bill would allow Western states to select 5 percent of the land under federal ownership and take control of the acreage and undeveloped mineral rights free of charge. They could sell it off or develop it with proceeds going toward public schools.

Indian reservations, national parks and monuments, wilderness areas, military holdings and wildlife preserves would be taken out of the equation. Areas being studied as potential wilderness would be eligible.

The state's selections would be specifically exempted from an environmental impact statement under the National Environmental Policy Act.

"This bill would cut off NEPA review at the knees, and in doing so cut off public participation and oversight by other federal agencies," said Steve Bloch, an attorney with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

Bishop said states wouldn't pick sensitive areas because they are of little economic value.

It is difficult to say how much land might be transferred should the bill become law. The federal government holds roughly 670 million acres nationally, most of it in the West, including 35 million acres in Utah, two-thirds of the state's total land mass.

Five percent of all of that land would be 1.7 million acres, but that does not take into account lands exempted by the bill.

"I don't really expect to get it done this year unless lightning strikes, because there's a long learning curve that has to go with it," Bishop said. But he plans to begin the education process when Congress returns from recess in September. --

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